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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the notion of communicative competence, particularly strategic competence in English language teaching. Strategic competence refers to the individual's ability to use communication strategies such as paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, and mime to get their message across and to compensate for a limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors as fatigue, distraction, and inattention. The paper examines various definitions of strategic competence and communication strategies, noting that both native and non-native speakers use communication strategies, but non-native speakers use them more frequently to cope with problems encountered while attempting to speak a second language. Successful language learning is not only a matter of developing grammatical, sociolinguistic, and semantic competence but also strategic competence, which involves the use of communication strategies and their role in transmitting and comprehending messages successfully. The paper concludes by discussing the place of communication strategies in language teaching. (Contains 10 bibliographic references.) (SM)

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Strategic Competence and Language Teaching

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Strategic Competence and Language Teaching

Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of communicative competence and more specifically strategic competence. The major portion of this paper is devoted to the various definitions of strategic competence and communication strategies (henceforth CSs). Then it briefly presents ways second language learners use to solve their communication problems due to their limited linguistic resources. Finally, the paper concludes with the place of communication strategies in language teaching.

Introduction

The ultimate goal of English language teaching is to develop the learners' communicative competence which will enable them to communicate successfully in the real world. Communicating successfully refers to passing on a comprehensible message to the listener. According to Canale (1983) communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. *Grammatical competence* is defined as mastery of the linguistic code (verbal or non-verbal). *Sociolinguistic competence*, according to Canale and Swain (1980), includes both sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse. *Discourse competènce* is concerned with the connection of a series of sentences or utterances to form a meaningful whole.

Teachers of English have been focusing on the first three components of communicative competence stated above, but have given little or no attention to strategic competence because they believe that the first three are the only essential components of communicative ability. They think that once grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence are developed, learners will be able to communicate effectively in the real world. Many writers stress the importance of the *strategic competence* as an essential component in the communicative competence and that it plays a major role in communicating successfully.

Strategic Competence

Since the main concern of this paper is strategic competence, we shall examine the ideas of other researchers concerning this component of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (ibid.) describe strategic competence as providing a *compensatory* function when the linguistic competence of the language user is inadequate. According to Canale and Swain (ibid), strategic competence consists of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies.

In Canale and Swain's definition (1980: 30), strategic competence is called into action to " compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence". For Little (1999), two problems arise from this definition: (i) there are many communicative situations in which strategic processes play an "offensive" rather than a "defensive" role; (ii) a definition of strategic competence that concentrates exclusively on language use may encourage the assumption that there is a psychological disjunction at the strategic level between language use and language learning.

On the other hand, Tarone and Yule (1989) believe that strategic competence includes "the ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act ... strategic competence is gauged, not by degree of correctness ... but rather by degree of success, or effectiveness" (1989:105).

Tarone and Yule (ibid.) proposed two areas related to strategic competence: the learners' skill in transmitting messages successfully and comprehensibly to the listener or understanding the information received, and the use of communication strategies by both speakers and listeners to solve their problems when arise during the course of communication.

One of the most recent, well-structured and fully comprehensive models of communicative competence which solves the problems that arise in Canale and Swain's definition, is that of Bachman (1990), who defines strategic competence as "the capacity that relates language competence, or knowledge of language, to the language user's knowledge structures and the features of the context in which communication takes place" (Bachman, 1990: 107).

According to Bachman (ibid.) *strategic competence* embraces all aspects of the assessment, planning and execution of communicative tasks. He sees strategic competence not only as a component of communicative competence, but also as a more general cognitive capacity. Bachman and Palmer (1996:70) find that these components together comprise "a set of metacognitive processes, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other

cognitive activities". Those other cognitive activities include language learning and all its ramifications.

Communication Strategies (CSs)

Strategic competence refers to the individual's ability to use 'communication strategies', e.g. paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, mime, to get their message across and to compensate for a limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors such as fatigue, distraction or inattention.

Both native and non-native speakers use communication strategies, but non-native speakers use them more frequently. Language learners often use communication strategies to cope with problems they encounter while attempting to speak a second or foreign language. They attempt to solve communication problems when they lack adequate resources in the target language. When faced with such problems, learners may try to avoid a certain language or grammatical items, abandon the message, paraphrase when they do not have the appropriate form, describe the object or its properties, use self-correction, repeat a language item to gain time, mumble, translate literally from native language, use similar sounding words, ask the interlocutor for the correct form or item, use gestures to convey meaning, insert a word or a phrase from their native language, apply L2 morphology and/ or phonology to L1 lexical items and use word coinage which produces items that do not exist in the target language. All of the above are called interlanguage communication strategies.

It seems very difficult to find a rigorous definition of *communication strategies* on which communication strategy researchers have had an agreement. There have been many definitions proposed for communication strategies of second language learners. Poulisse et al (1984:72) defined CSs as "S*trategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcoming (Poulisse et al, 1984: 72).*

To illustrate the notion communication strategies, the following are examples taken from the author's study (Author, 2001:213-217).

1. It is something like a chair used to put the child on and push it. (Pushchair) - Circumlocution strategy.
2. The car is unmove (The car broke down) - Word coinage strategy
3. Number telephone (Telephone number), electrical stairs (escalator) - Literal translation strategy
4. What is this called in English? - Appeal for help
5. Ascenseur (lift) - Foreignizing strategy
6. The car was damaged (The car broke down) - Approximation strategy
7. He just completed his road ...,..., his way - Correction strategy
8. He was happy because he didn't er er he didn't care for him - Self-repetition strategy
9. They are cleaning *stuff*,..., *things* (detergents) - All-purpose words strategy

I can say that most of the messages transmitted in the above utterances are comprehensible and listeners can guess what is meant because of the spreakers' use of communication strategies.

Therefore, CSs are successful means of communication. *Appeal for help* also leads to learning by getting the target language item needed.

Communication startegies for understanding what is said

Sometimes the word has multiple meanings, it might not be the one intended, and we may have misheard it in the first place. The question now is how we know what the speaker meant? The answer is using some communication strategies. There are five strategies that can be used if listeners do not understand what is said.

1. *Appeal for help*: Trying to elicit help from your partner by asking an explicit question to fill the information gap.

Example:

It is something we use to keep food in. What is the name?

2. *Asking for repetition*: Requesting repetition when not hearing or misunderstanding something properly.

Examples:

Pardon?

Beg your pardon?

What?

Can you say it again, please?

3. *Asking for clarification*: Requesting explanation of an unfamiliar meaning structure.

Examples:

What do you mean?

You saw what?

4. *Asking for confirmation:* Requesting confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly. It might be by asking full questions (*You mean....? You said...? Do you mean that...?*

Examples:

You mean he did not understand it?

You said that the International School is the best?

Do you mean that I should go to a travel agent?

5. *Comprehension check*: Asking questions to check that the interlocutor or partner can follow you.

Examples:

And what is the escalator? The escalator. Do you know what the escalator is?

Communication Strategies in Language Teaching

Teaching these strategies to our learners and giving more attention to strategic competence will help them communicate more effectively and successfully. Consciousness - raising of such strategies will equip second/foreign language learners with the resources necessary for analysis and control which lead to successful communication. However, I do not encourage the use of such strategies if the learner is capable of communicating without them. Communicating without employing communication strategies means that learners' proficiency level is high. Undoubtedly,

the lower the learners' level is, the more communication strategies are used. Needless to say that when the learners' language proficiency level is high, they will encounter fewer communication problems. The by-product will be the more problems encountered, the more communication strategies are used.

Students should also be encouraged to take risks and to use CSs. This means that learners should use all their available resources to communicate language resources without being afraid of making errors (Yule and Tarone, 1990). Not all CSs should be encouraged, however. For example, topic avoidance, mumbling, language switch, repetition, L2-ignorance acknowledgement and message abandonment should not be encouraged. Other strategies, such as circumlocution, appeal for help, self-correction, word coinage, literal translation, approximation and all-purpose words may be encouraged.

This consciousness-raising of some strategies is important for the following reasons. First, communication strategies can lead to learning by eliciting unknown language items from the interlocutor, especially in the appeal for help strategy. Second, communication strategies are part of language use. Even native speakers use communication strategies in their speech and use time-gaining devices in order to keep the conversation going, such as "*you know*", "*what do you call it?*", and other strategies. Finally, the use of a communication strategy is not an indication of communication failure; on the contrary, it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge. The results of Rababah's study (2001), which showed that more than 90 per cent of the learners' attempts in describing objects, telling a story and role playing were comprehensible and successful because they used communication strategies, support this claim.

The subjects' use of CSs helped them to solve their communication problems and achieve their communicative goals.

It is also possible to provide learners with L2 models of the use of certain CSs by means of listening materials and videos which contain communication strategy use, and then to ask learners to identify, categorise and evaluate CS use by native speakers or other L2 speakers. Another approach suggested by Faerch and Kasper (1986) is to record conversations between native and non-native speakers on video, and then let the students view their own recording and analyse their own strategy use. To be good speakers, it is necessary for learners to be good listeners. Careful listening also helps improve pronunciation and reveals how conversational language expresses meaning. Listening to real-life situations is an excellent way to expose students to the different ways in which things can be said, which will help them in their attempts to express themselves. The more the student is exposed to the target language, the faster and easier it will be to assimilate the language.

Another approach could be asking learners to perform tasks, such as story telling, object description and role-plays. These are easy to integrate into the CLT classroom. It might also be a good idea to provide learners with certain basic vocabulary and sentence structures to describe the properties and functions of objects like: *top-side, triangular, square* (Tarone and Yule, 1989). Dornyei and Thurrell (1992) suggested using structures such as: *"it's a kind of/sort of..., the thing you use for..., it's what /when you....., it's something you do/say when..."*. They also provided a set of fillers and hesitation devices which come in handy when learners feel that they are encountering a communication problem (e.g., *well, actually, you know, as a matter of fact,*

how shall I put it.... etc.), as well as a set of ways to appeal for help (e.g., *What do you call it? What is the word for...?).*

The results of the author's study (Author, 2001) showed that even weak learners were good at transmitting comprehensible and successful messages. This is probably a result of the use of communication strategies. University students and school learners should, therefore, be aware of these strategies and understand their value. Weak learners will like the idea as it makes things easier for them and helps them to solve their communication problems.

Conclusion

All teachers and learners need to understand that successful language learning is not only a matter of developing grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and semantic competence, but also strategic competence which involves the use of CSs and their role in transmitting and comprehending messages successfully.

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